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# Nebraskans Reach for The STARS

*The Nebraska STARS plan is ambitious; it is idealistic; it is the right thing to do for the right reasons to get the right results, the authors maintain.*

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BY PAT ROSCHEWSKI WITH CHRIS GALLAGHER AND JODY ISERNHAGEN

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Decisions about whether or not students are learning should not take place in the legislature, the governor's office, or the department of education. They should take place in the classroom, because that is where learning occurs.

— Douglas Christensen, Commissioner  
Nebraska Department of Education

**I**N THE SPIRIT typical of independent and hard-working Nebraskans, policy makers and educators are collaboratively building an assessment system that has not been attempted in any other state. The intent of Nebraska's School-based Teacher-led Assessment and Reporting System (STARS) is to do the right things for the right reasons in order to obtain the right results. The STARS plan is very different from other states' school "reform" approaches that are based on external mandates and compliance. The Nebraska approach to school accountability is internal. It is based on the premise of school improvement, and, according to Chris Gallagher, it gives educators "a seat at the table."<sup>1</sup>

Gallagher's premise is accurate. As a 26-year veteran Nebraska educator, I have participated in this process on both the local and state levels. In each role — that of a teacher, an administrator, and now a state facilitator — I have had the opportunity to be "seated at the table" and to contribute to Nebraska's plan, which will measure and validate student learning and high-quality teaching. The STARS plan brings together the best of both worlds: student learning is foremost, but public accountability is provided as well. Indeed, STARS places the responsibility of teaching and learning where it belongs. The teachers and administrators who create high-quality learning environ-

ments in the 585 school districts in the state will be directly involved in affirming the quality and in measuring the learning of the students in their classrooms.

## Why Would Nebraska Choose to Be Different?

As the 49th state to adopt an assessment system, Nebraska has learned from the challenges and problems faced by other states that have implemented single tests or high-stakes accountability models. Nebraskans have made a deliberate decision to avoid the pitfalls caused by the misuse of information from standardized tests. Nationally normed standardized achievement tests do indeed have a purpose; they provide a means of comparing students' knowledge or skills to those of students nationally. But as a single measure, they are not in and of themselves enough to gauge the quality of education.

According to James Popham, there are three primary reasons that standardized achievement tests should not be used as a single measurement of educational quality.<sup>2</sup> The first reason is that norm-referenced standardized tests do not match what is

taught in the local curriculum. In fact, a study conducted by the Buros Center for Testing at the University of Nebraska in 1998 discovered that the five primary standardized achievement tests match only 35% to 40% of the Nebraska state standards. It would make no sense to use one of these instruments to measure the effectiveness of student learning in Nebraska's schools when the test items reflect only some of the state's content standards.

Second, because the purpose of the norm-referenced standardized achievement test is to "differentiate between student scores" and create a score variance, items on which most students perform well are generally not included on the tests. If most students do well on an item, that item will produce too little variance in test scores to be useful for comparisons. Ironically then, the better the job that teachers do in teaching important knowledge or skills, the less likely it is that such knowledge and skills will be tested!

Third, the types of test items that appear on standardized achievement tests reflect more than what is taught in school; success on some items is a measure of a student's innate intellectual ability, while

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success on others represents the student's opportunity to learn out of school. Often this opportunity is related to a student's socioeconomic status. So to use these types of tests solely to judge the effectiveness of schooling would be in error. As Popham remarks, "Employing standardized achievement tests to ascertain educational quality is like measuring temperature with a table-spoon."<sup>3</sup> Standardized achievement tests are valid measures for what they are intended to do, but they should not be expected to serve as the sole measures of high-quality education. Yet many states have made the mistake of using them for that very purpose. Nebraska's schools are determined to make better decisions for their students by learning from the experiences of other states.

Each Nebraska school values its local curriculum and its ethical approach to education. Unique and responsive to its constituents, each of the 585 school districts must validate to the local community the high-quality education that it provides to the children being served. As Nebraskans hear about the situations in other states in which the curriculum is being narrowed by state-mandated testing or in which unethical practices are occurring as a result of testing, we know that we do not want our students, teachers, administrators, or schools to experience the same ill effects. In other states the negative impact of narrowing the curriculum is undeniable. Time is spent on test preparation rather than on instruction. In a recent *Kappan* editorial, Pauline Gough cites several examples. An Indiana fifth-grade teacher spends all year preparing students for the statewide test, administered to sixth-graders in early autumn. A retired teacher bemoans the fact that "all the things we did that made learning fun and that made children love school are out the window." In North Carolina, educators have "focused on the information to be tested, with higher-order thinking and problem solving . . . often falling by the wayside."<sup>4</sup> Debra Viadero reports information from a researcher at Rice University in Houston who contends that Texas children are being shortchanged because they read no prose from fall until January; instead, these students are reading the types of literature that are found on the state tests.<sup>5</sup> Narrowing our local curriculum to what might appear on a state test is unacceptable to Nebraskans.

Nebraska's policy makers and educators have decided that it would make no

sense for a state just beginning to build an assessment system from scratch to knowingly follow such paths. Nebraskans take to heart the suggestion by Lorrie Shepard, a professor of research methodology at the University of Colorado and outgoing president of the American Educational Research Association, who made clear in Viadero's article that the appropriate goal for educators should be to find ways to guard against the "negative effects of externally imposed tests and to develop classroom assessment practices that can be trusted to help students take the next steps in learning."<sup>6</sup> Because Nebraskans are unwilling to do harm to students and teachers with the standardized testing models in the country today or to give up the depth and breadth of the local curriculum that is so valued by Nebraska's schools, we are compelled to do exactly as Shepard has suggested.

### **Assessment Affirmation, Not Reform**

Nebraska has not been forced into the accountability mode by failing schools. On the contrary, Nebraska's students consistently rank high on National Assessment of Educational Progress and ACT tests. The state is not forced to "back up" or "fix" anything; it can start at the beginning and approach standards, assessment, and accountability in the right way. In the spirit of renewal, Nebraska is willing to invest its resources in its educators to reinforce and even improve the high-quality education taking place in the state's 585 school districts.

Because Nebraska's schools are performing well and are focused on continuous school improvement, the state is not forced into making decisions about whether students are learning or schools are effective on the basis of a single, once-a-year test. The state does not need to "document deviance," as suggested by Joseph Strayhorn in his book *The Competent Child*,<sup>7</sup> but rather is in a position to provide "assessment affirmation." Decisions that determine whether or not students are learning can be local ones based on a balanced approach, one that combines evidence from both standardized tests and day-to-day classroom assessments.

The latter, according to Richard Stiggins, are the assessments that we have "all but ignored in our journey to school improvement. . . . If assessment is not work-

ing effectively in our classrooms every day, then assessment at all other levels (district, state, national, or international) represents a complete waste of time and money."<sup>8</sup> Local control, greatly valued in Nebraska, is honored in the school-based, teacher-led approach. Within individual school districts and classrooms are the administrators and teachers who create standards-based classrooms, who identify and teach to the standards, who measure student achievement, and who adjust their instruction to the data obtained. As Deborah Meier points out, the United States is not in danger of too much local control, but it is missing opportunities for balance. Meier would further contend that power should be placed in the hands of those whose agenda is first and foremost the learning of particular groups of children.<sup>9</sup> If a learner or teacher believes that learning or teaching is out of his or her control, the motivation is external, and the results are arbitrary at best. In the spirit of renewal and continuous local school improvement, Nebraska moves forward with its plan.

### **Legislative Support**

In the spring of 2000, the Nebraska legislature passed L.B. 812, which supports the school-based and teacher-led initiative. Proposed by Commissioner Douglas Christensen and the state board of education, the STARS plan represents a compromise between local control and state support. The plan provides flexibility for districts in the assessment tools they use but still requires school districts to adopt standards, to report annually on the success of their students on the standards, and to participate in a statewide writing assessment. The legislation supports a "phase-in" approach, which requires the reporting of one content area in three grade levels each year in conjunction with a statewide writing assessment. The reporting begins with reading and writing in the year 2001, to be followed by mathematics and writing in 2002, science and writing in 2003, and social studies and writing in 2004. The legislation calls for the identification by in-state and nationally recognized assessment experts of "model assessments" at the end of each reporting year so that school districts will have the opportunity to adopt one of the identified models or adapt the qualities of the model for integration into their own. In this way the state provides flexibility and support

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while school districts exercise local control over the curriculum and the measurement of their students' learning.

In the fall of 2001 the state will publish a "State of the Schools" report that will profile each Nebraska school district. School districts will be rated according to how well they meet several specified criteria: percentages of students who meet the standards, quality of the assessments, and a challenge index for specified populations. School districts will receive a "school performance rating" based on these multiple criteria and the opportunity to see how individual school districts compare with the state aggregate. In this way the state does not rank schools but allows each district's performance to be measured on the identified criteria. Statewide accountability models a criterion-referenced process and avoids the potentially harmful effects of norm-referenced comparisons and rank ordering.

Unwilling to impose a model of external mandates and compliance on Nebraska's schools or to force them into a situation that narrows the curriculum and invites unethical practice, the legislature and the state board of education have agreed to invest in the professionalism and expertise of the state's educators. STARS allows the educators in Nebraska to assess "for learning" rather than merely to conduct assessment "of learning."<sup>10</sup> Policy makers are relying on teachers' collective expertise and are expecting Nebraska educators to engage in a conversation focused on three fundamental questions: What do we expect our students to know and be able to do? How will we know that our students are learning? How will we use assessment data to change classroom practice and improve instruction?

The state's policy makers believe that engagement in this conversation requires each teacher to know the clear learning targets for his or her classroom, to teach to and measure those expectations, and then to use the assessment data to improve instruction. Nebraska's plan is clearly focused on student learning and effective teaching.

### **A Balanced Assessment System**

STARS is a balanced assessment system in two ways. Balance must exist not only between the types of assessments used in the local school districts but also between state direction and local flexibility. The latter is perhaps the more delicate bal-

ance to maintain. The state must establish a framework of expectations and provide leadership while still allowing choice for local districts and encouraging their own leadership. Appropriate balance will be found when classroom and local curricula are honored while statewide accountability is achieved.

School districts are including a balance

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of formative (classroom, teacher-designed) and summative (standardized, large-scale) assessment in their planning. In combination, each district's assessment tools will fully measure the standards and provide a more complete picture of the success of students in meeting them using their own local curriculum. Typically, districts will use the norm-referenced achievement tests they are currently using that measure some of the standards and add complementary, formative assessment tools or classroom assessments in order to determine the success of their students. The statewide writing assessment will provide an additional snapshot of student achievement that will complete the school's portfolio of multiple assessments.

The effectiveness of formative classroom assessment is essential to the Nebraska plan. Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam, two British educational researchers, have been studying formative classroom assessment and its implications for student achievement. The results that Black and Wiliam report have been amazing. In several of their studies, they have discovered that formative assessment can be a

powerful tool in improving student learning. Feedback on tests, seatwork, and homework gives each pupil guidance in how to improve, and when students are given help and an opportunity to work on improvement, student learning increases. When high-quality formative assessment was used with students, learning gains of as much as three or four grade-equivalents or an improvement of 15 percentile points occurred. Further, their studies show that improved formative assessment helps the (so-called) low attainers more than the rest and that students' motivation and self-esteem were significantly increased as well.<sup>11</sup>

Each school district will plan, design, and articulate the combination of assessment measures that they will implement in a "district assessment plan," which will be submitted to the Nebraska Department of Education. The department will review this plan and provide feedback to the districts. After the first round of assessment is administered and results obtained and reported, the districts will submit their assessments for review. An evaluation by an external agency will provide additional feedback, and the identification of "model assessments" will give school districts the opportunity to modify their own processes in light of the models. This process is repeated for each year's designated content area.

In this way, the Nebraska Department of Education is designing a balanced approach: the state models and provides educational leadership and direction while local districts custom-fit the process to their own needs.

### **Staff Development and Assessment Literacy**

The Nebraska initiative is based on two primary premises. The first is that there must be statewide professional development. Nebraska's educators must have access to high-quality experiences in assessment literacy and assistance in understanding how to build a standards-based classroom — that is, how to identify, teach to, and measure appropriate student results. Administrators, too, must have the opportunity to grow and to develop their capacity for instructional leadership. The administrative role must be to advocate on behalf of balanced assessment and its development. Administrators must understand how to recognize assessments of high quality and know how to use them effectively in order for schools to improve.

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Perhaps even more important will be the role of administrators as instructional leaders when assessment results are collected, interpreted, and analyzed. This leadership must translate into changed classroom practice and instructional improvement.

STARS challenges all of Nebraska's educators to take on new and expanded roles. And they are responding to the challenge. In a massive statewide initiative, educators from more than 500 school districts are working throughout the 2000-2001 school year. These teachers and administrators have been aligning their local curricula with state standards, and they are learning about and designing criterion-referenced assessment. At a June 2000 workshop for Nebraska teachers, Teri Niveen, an elementary teacher from a small school, commented, "We've always been assessing our students, but now we are relying less on intuition and are finding methods to more accurately measure the learning targets for kids. We are also learning about some things that we do not need to be teaching and other things that we should emphasize." At the same workshop, Jackie Kelsay, an elementary principal, stated, "This process will definitely add accountability. We have never really had that before. Now we can show through standards what kids in fourth grade can do." Given the right kind of opportunity and support to work collaboratively, Nebraska's educators are not just responding, they are excelling!

In order to contribute to the development of assessment literacy, Richard Stiggins of the Assessment Training Institute of Portland, Oregon, has contracted his services to develop assessment literacy through the "learning team" model. Teams of teachers, members of educational service units, representatives of higher education, and district personnel have received training to deliver professional development in assessment literacy. Each geographic area in the state is represented by a learning team so that all districts have access to these professional development opportunities.

The implications of developing assessment literacy extend beyond inservice training. Ironically, as Stiggins has observed, classroom teachers spend significant amounts of time in assessment-related activities, but they have not been prepared to be good classroom assessors. "Teacher training programs have been notorious over the dec-

ades for their lack of relevant assessment information at both graduate and undergraduate levels," Stiggins points out.<sup>12</sup> Thus conversation about preservice preparation of teachers and administrators has begun across the state among Nebraska's 17 institutions of higher education. Classes on the undergraduate and graduate levels are being planned, an assessment endorsement is being proposed, and new programming is being developed. The state's K-16 education system is challenged to address the issue of preparing educators to be good classroom assessors and preparing building administrators to understand and accept the tasks inherent in the measurement of student results in a standards-based environment. No longer are Nebraskans willing to settle for an "assessment world steeped in mystery and illusion, intimidation and vulnerability, stress and anxiety."<sup>13</sup> Nebraskans are reaching to the STARS instead.

### Assessment Quality

Currently, the capacity for assessment writing varies tremendously from district to district and from classroom to classroom. The second premise of the Nebraska plan is that classroom teachers should be able to write high-quality assessments that will accurately and reliably measure student results. In order to reach this goal, the state of Nebraska has contracted with the Buros Center for Testing, whose staff members have served as advisors to the state and the state's educators regarding the technical qualities of good assessment. The center has provided the state's educators with a description of six indicators of high-quality assessment. Thus the expectations are clear for local school districts, educational service units, administrators, and teachers as they write the assessments to be used to measure the state or local standards. All educators are able to use these materials to self-assess the instruments that they have designed.

The state's educational service units have been providing leadership for the project of aligning the standards with local curricula as well as the assessment-writing project. As teachers have been working together with student results in mind, they have addressed the two essential questions: What do we expect our students to know and be able to do? And how will we know

that our students know these things and can do them? As they ask and seek the answers to the first two questions, the third question is looming in their minds: How will we adjust classroom practice to the information that we gather?

The Nebraska STARS plan is ambitious; it is idealistic; it is the right thing to do for the right reasons to get the right results. The state approach is modeling exactly what it expects of each school district and each classroom: the measurement of results using a criterion-referenced rather than a norm-referenced, comparative process. The goal of Nebraska's plan is to offer equity in assessment for each student and for each district. All of Nebraska's students and school districts have the opportunity to know in advance the expectations and then measure themselves against those expectations without fear of being compared. Nebraskans intend to provide their students and taxpayers with the best of both worlds: high-quality teaching and learning with statewide accountability. As Nebraskans reach for the STARS, decisions about effective teaching and learning will remain where they belong — in Nebraska's classrooms.

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1. Chris Gallagher, "A Seat at the Table: Teachers Reclaiming Assessment Through Rethinking Accountability," *Phi Delta Kappan*, March 2000, pp. 502-7.

2. W. James Popham, "Why Standardized Tests Don't Measure Educational Quality," *Educational Leadership*, March 1999, pp. 8-15.

3. Ibid., p. 10.

4. Pauline B. Gough, "Moving Toward the Danger," *Phi Delta Kappan*, April 2000, p. 562.

5. Debra Viadero, "High-Stakes Tests Lead Debate at Researchers' Gathering," *Education Week*, 3 May 2000, p. 6.

6. Ibid.

7. Joseph M. Strayhorn, *The Competent Child* (New York: Guilford Press, 1988).

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9. Deborah Meier, *Will Standards Save Public Education?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000).

10. Ruth Sutton, "Assessment with Confidence," presentation to the conference on "Assessment Without Victims: Addressing Diversity with Student-Involved Classroom Assessment," Portland, Ore., July 2000.

11. Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam, "Inside the Black Box: Raising Standards Through Classroom Assessment," *Phi Delta Kappan*, October 1998, pp. 139-48.

12. Richard Stiggins, "Confronting the Barriers to Effective Assessment," *School Administrator*, December 1998, p. 6.

13. Ibid.